

Critical Issues in Special Education

Teacher Supply and Demand:

Overview

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The shortage of fully certified special education teachers, which has been described as severe, chronic, and pervasive, threatens the quality of educational services that students with disabilities receive. Over the last decade, researchers have investigated the magnitude of the special education teacher shortage problem and factors that contribute to the imbalance between supply and demand.

This special issue includes research syntheses that critically evaluate the complex range of factors that contribute to teacher shortages in special education. These syntheses present a review of what is known about the supply and demand problem, provide a research base to help inform efforts to address the shortage problem, and suggest research questions needing study.

The Current Policy Context

While there has been a shortage of fully certified special education teachers in the United States for at least two decades, it is only recently that this shortage has received significant attention from policymakers at the national level. This has occurred at least in part as a result of the mandate in the act known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002) that all content area teachers in Title I schools be “highly qualified” by the 2005–2006 school year. This mandate was built upon a recently developed consensus among policymakers and researchers that highly qualified teachers significantly increase student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Sanders & Horn, 1998; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). For example, Sanders and Horn found that the quality of the teacher contributes more to student achievement than any other factor, including student background, class size, or class composition. Although the NCLB mandate does not apply to most special education teachers, it is widely assumed that the imminent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will in-

clude a “highly qualified” mandate that mirrors the intent of NCLB.

NCLB and a related mandate in IDEA have tremendous potential for finally ending the shortage of special education teachers. Indeed, the U.S. Congress is working to align Title II of the Higher Education Act with NCLB, so that states will receive the financial support to address the teacher shortage in the form of loan forgiveness for candidates who plan to teach in shortage areas. If significant funds are available for prospective teachers, this support will likely attract increasing numbers of teachers into special education and other shortage areas.

Although a mandate for highly qualified teachers and related legislation has the *potential* for increasing the number of certified special education teachers, it also has the potential for exacerbating the teacher shortage. For example, if the content area requirement in NCLB is applied to secondary-level special education teachers, these teachers will be required to hold certification in *both* special education and the content area they teach (e.g., mathematics, which is also an area of teacher shortages). Although such a mandate would provide increasing assurance that all special education teachers are highly qualified to teach content area subjects, it could also make the shortage of special education teachers worse, unless powerful policy initiatives are enacted to counteract this outcome.

A policy initiative from NCLB has begun to emerge in some states (e.g., Florida, Texas) to address the “highly qualified” mandate, as state-level officials have become aware of the difficulties inherent in ensuring that all teachers are highly qualified (and thus fully certified) by 2005–2006. These states have begun to offer alternative routes to certification that remove certain requirements or lower standards for certification. The most extreme of these alternatives is the route that is included in NCLB and promoted by advocates of deregulation of teacher certification (Paige, 2002; Walsh, 2001). This option allows anyone holding a bachelor’s degree to take a test of content and/or pedagogical knowledge and become certi-

fied. Thus, these individuals become “highly qualified” without any coursework or field experience in education. Although some evidence is emerging to indicate that student achievement outcomes are lower for teachers who are prepared by alternate routes that significantly lower requirements for certification (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002), it appears that these routes to certification will be increasingly offered as the deadline for the “highly qualified” mandate approaches. If we are to provide highly qualified teachers for every student with a disability in the United States, it is important to fully understand the nature and scope of the current teacher shortage in special education.

Overview of the Special Series

The research syntheses that follow, which were commissioned by the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education (COPSSE; see Note) at the University of Florida, provide information on contributors to the shortage problem. Collectively, the research syntheses cover three related areas: teacher supply and demand in special education, diversity in the special education workplace, and the retention and attrition of special education teachers.

The first article, by McLeskey, Tyler, and Flippin, provides an analysis of factors influencing the supply of and demand for special education teachers. The authors begin with a discussion of the magnitude of the special education teacher shortage, considering variations by locality, job description, and diversity of personnel. This is followed by an analysis of trends in the demand for and supply of special education teachers and a review of state and local policies that address the teacher shortage. The article concludes with a list of priorities for future research to address critical unanswered questions regarding the supply of and demand for special education teachers.

The second article, by Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, and Flippin, addresses the critical need for teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds. Considering diversity in the teaching force is essential to ensure that students with disabilities have opportunities to learn from teachers who reflect the diversity of the society we live in. Tyler and colleagues synthesize research findings on the current demographics of diverse teachers and the impact of teacher diversity on student outcomes. They then summarize the challenges faced by students of color who aspire to become teachers. Next, the authors consider qualities of teacher preparation programs that successfully prepare teachers of color. Finally, directions for future research that should provide information that is needed to address the critical shortage of special education teachers from CLD backgrounds are described.

The third article, by Billingsley, provides a comprehensive synthesis of special education attrition and retention research studies. The attrition of special educators is a major

contributing factor to the teacher shortage problem, as teachers who leave must be replaced. Previous research suggests that special educators are more likely to leave their positions than general educators. Billingsley reviews current conceptual models of teacher attrition and synthesizes the research around several major themes: teacher characteristics and personal factors, teacher qualifications, work environments, and teachers’ affective reactions to work. Following this thematic review, a critique of definitional, conceptual, and methodological approaches used to study special education attrition is provided, and priorities for future research are discussed.

The final article, by discussants Brownell, Hirsch, and Seo, suggests policy considerations for meeting the demand for highly qualified special education teachers. The authors begin with a review of the impact of quality induction programs on teacher retention, followed by a review of the need for increasing the availability of alternative routes to certification to address the teacher shortage. Brownell and colleagues then address the need for a comprehensive database to determine the effectiveness of strategies used to increase the supply of qualified special educators. They emphasize the need for systemic reform to ensure a highly qualified workforce in special education and conclude their article with a call to take advantage of the current policy context to improve the supply of qualified special education teachers.

AUTHORS’ NOTE

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NOTE

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